

‘So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ might dwell in me’

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When Roman generals had won a great military victory, the senate, purporting to act on behalf of the people, would vote them an event known as a Triumph- hence the word entering our own language.

One of the greatest of ancient times was the Third Triumph of Pompey. The victorious leader arrived in Rome wearing the cloak of Alexander the Great, with thousands of captured enemies marching in front of him, he threw gold to his loyal soldiers who cheered his every move. It was the beginning of his political power, the summit of his public career.

Except, of course, the only way from a summit is down. Within a few years Pompey was dead- rejected by the same mob that acclaimed him and his head then cut off by his political enemies in a far off land. Pliny the Elder observed that the elaborate sculpture which Pompey had made of his head, merely foreshadowed his coming decapitation. As victory was celebrated the seeds of downfall were inevitably sown.

Of course, the Roman Empire was not just the hegemonic super power in which the context of New Testament scripture is written, it was quite literally the entire world. It shaped every aspect of life. The way people thought about success and failure, what was worth celebrating and what was to be ashamed of, was entirely formed by this power which valued strength above all else. And it is against the backdrop of this Roman triumphalism that St Paul wrote the Second letter to the Corinthians which we heard today.

You could not have a clearer contrast to this vision of power and success in our lesson today. As Paul instructs us- if we are to boast it is of our weakness. It is very hard to emphasise quite how radical an idea this was- and quite how radical an idea it remains. What is worth boasting about, what is worth celebrating for a Christian, is the polar opposite of what the world seeks to celebrate. It is exceptionally tricky stuff- even today- think, examine your souls: how often do you, do we celebrate something the world would think of as a failure?

And yet that is what we are called to do. And called not just by Paul but by Christ himself. We even see what might be thought of as a moment of weakness for Jesus in our gospel. St Mark relates his return to his home town, to Nazareth where he was known and, you would have thought, loved. Yet, the people reject him: ‘He could do no deed of power there’. A home gig is always a tough one but this serves of a deeper theological reminder and a challenge to any of us who is a regular attendee of church: that sometimes it is the people who are supposed to be most welcoming who are not, those who think they have heard it before who most need to hear.

Yet- and this is the central point of that we might learn from today- after his moment of weakness in Nazareth, by the end of the same reading, his disciples- the ones he has blessed and equipped- go out into the wider world and are capable of deeds of great power. They heal, they anoint, they forgive. All this, of course, foreshadows the arc of Crucifixion and Resurrection itself: Christ becomes weak and vulnerable, Christ dies a man, so that we, through and in him might become strong and might live, even for eternity. To even live in and with God.

Therefore, as Christians, we are called to live in the light of this truth in this day and age, on this earth, in this town. We are called to show the strength of God through weakness. Where does strength come from- well from enabling others, from drawing others to know and love Jesus. Not from our own will or our own actions but from God and from pointing towards God in Christ.

In our Gospel the people proclaim 'What deeds of power are being done by his hands!' Those deeds of power are still being done. And done by those hands with which God acts in earth- that is to say each and every one of you. However, these deeds of power are not powerful as the world thinks of power, not strong in the sense that the world uses the word.

Yet, to Almighty God- and the clue there really is in the name- there is more strength, more glory, more power, in those small acts of love than in any political or military triumph.

So. How are we to do this in this day and age? How are we to communicate this great strength of God to a world which, like the people of Nazareth, often thinks it does not need to hear. Well; by actions which make us appear weak. Give up valuable time for worship and for service, care for those in need- love, truly love, not just pretend to love, truly love those who disagree with you. Admit you are wrong often. Give not just generously but sacrificially of time and resources. Proclaim the good news even when or if it is ignored or ridiculed. In short, make yourself as vulnerable as you can.

Because by doing so you make yourself more like Christ, and that is why we do all of this, why we give worship, why we confess our sins, why we run any number of community initiatives or good works. Not because we believe them to be good in and of themselves but because by doing them we become more like Christ, we enter into relationship with Christ, we love like Christ and so are made strong, stronger than any general or politician or earthly figure, can possibly be. Strong like Christ, whose strength, sealed in that we are about to partake- his body and his blood- is weakness, and sacrifice, and love.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.